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ABSTRACT

A discussion of pragmatic issues in both developmental studies (DS) and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction at the college level argues that because the two fields have common problems, challenges, and objectives, they have become homogenized as one in many institutions. Because full-time college faculty avoid teaching developmental English courses, less-qualified part-time faculty are often hired to teach such courses, where both DS and ESL students are grouped as "remedial" students in the same section. Despite the fact that there are some similarities between the two student groups, they are not the same: ESL students are in the early stages of English language acquisition and may be considered beginners at English writing. This is not the case with DS students. Thus, there are inherent biases when the groups are homogenized groups in the classroom, and inherent challenges for writing teachers. (MSE)

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Homogenizing Developmental Studies and ESL

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English teachers have begun to realize that little in their background has prepared them to teach writing to someone who has not already learned how to do it.—Mina P. Shaughnessy

This statement has continually possessed me. If students in my class already know how to write, then am I a teacher of writing? When people ask me what I do for a living, am I being dishonest if I say that I am a writing teacher? And if I am not considered a writing teacher, what do I really teach in the classroom?

Obviously, if I (a so-called "writing teacher") have this phenomenal amount of doubt about what it means to teach writing, it is not surprising why it is difficult to find faculty willing to teach writing courses (as opposed to literature courses). Granted, tenured English faculty will usually accept an upper level (English majors only) section of Advanced Composition, but mention Freshman level composition, especially Developmental Writing, and suddenly everyone's schedule seems filled. As a colleague of mine so boldly stated, "Well, if they can't write at this level, then they have no business being here at the college." The underlying implications are 1) only students who can already write belong in the academy, and 2) if the others have not learned how to write by now, they never will learn. Within both of these presuppositions are remnants

of the Critical Age Hypothesis that suggests that the teaching of writing is useless after a certain age. Therefore, if this colleague of mine is representative of other faculty and administrators, why are we attempting to offer writing courses for what we have labeled as "developmental/basic writers"?

Stephen Krashen makes a distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Acquisition is a process that is primarily unconscious and inaccessible to direct teaching. Language learning, on the other hand, consists of rules and usage that can be taught by teachers of writing. Using Betty Robinett's terminology, it is the difference between teaching penmanship and acquiring the process of composition: "not all native speakers of English master this second stage of writing" (195). The question I raise is whether Robinett's statement is a description of students or a prescription that biases the image we faculty have of these students.

With this introduction, I would like to begin by highlighting the pragmatic concerns of most colleges and how these often guide administrative decisions concerning classroom pedagogy. The most problematic concern is staffing. As I have already mentioned, many qualified full-time faculty steer away from teaching writing courses. Administrators are then forced to hire adjunct faculty, often at the last possible moment as they are forced to open new sections to accommodate student need. Many of these part-timers may have little or no training in the concerns of teaching Developmental Studies (DS) students and English as a Second Language (ESL) students. And even if they do have training, their adjunct status prohibits them from making any pedagogical changes in the generic departmental syllabus. As such, it is not surprising that administrators attempt to minimize the number of part-time faculty necessary by

combining any group of students that might be considered "remedial" (DS and ESL) into the same section. After all, the last-minute hires are usually not specialists in either area. Having one generic section only requires one generic teacher.

In addition to these pragmatic concerns, many administrators who are indeed quite qualified in the areas of DS and ESL make their decision to combine the two groups of students following the theory elaborated by Alice Horning. As Horning explains, "the central hypothesis of the theory states that basic writers develop writing skills and achieve proficiency in the same way that other adults develop second language skills, principally because, for basic writers, academic formal written English is a new and distinct linguistic system" (2). DS students are not transitional or eleventh-hour learners. Rather the opposite assumption is adopted: written English, as a second language, can be acquired by these students at the college level.

If we accept this assumption that language acquisition at the college level is the same for both ESL and DS writers, the logical move would be to combine these two groups. That is, if both groups of students acquire this second language of written English through an unconscious process that is not accessible to direct teaching, whether the two are combined or not seems inconsequential because "every writing teacher who has used grammatical or punctuation exercises in class knows that while it is possible to present those things in class, getting the learner to use that information in written production is not necessarily or even a usual result of the class presentation" (Horning 22). In other words, the typical ESL or DS student may learn to regurgitate analytically the rules of written discourse when prompted in class, but s/he may not be able to produce a representative synthesis of these in his/her own writing. And the class has no

bearing on when, if ever, this synthesis will be achieved. For instance, ask any student "How did you learn to write?" The most common answer cited is another writer, not a writing course.

Many instructors are reluctant to take this extreme stance because again the ambiguity of what it means to be a writing teacher is raised. Instead, some advocates for the combined classroom setting avoid getting into Krashen's hypothesis of acquisition and learning by focusing their attention on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: if people speak a different language (as Horning suggests of DS and ESL students), they also live in a different world. Following this hypothesis, the combined classroom offers both DS and ESL students a place where they can become assimilated into the foreign culture of academia. Together, they can focus on eliminating the language habits that influence their acquisition of English. According to Horning, the assumption is that "those students intent on preservation will have the greatest difficulty in mastering the standard written form" (59). "ESL students who have learned the 'one right way' to spell and punctuate in their own languages sometimes resent having to learn another system" (Shaughnessy 2): DS students resent having to learn written English because they have already learned the "right way" to communicate orally in English.

In addition to these psychological similarities, both ESL and DS students typically make the same basic errors in written English. Melissa Walschak, an ESL specialist at University of Texas-San Antonio, offers the following list: "overregularization of rules, auxillary verb forms, possessive markers, plural/singular, instability of past tense –ed, progressive –ing forms, subject-verb agreement, "to be", omission of plural –s or –es." Adopting Shaughnessy's viewpoint concerning this list allows these errors to be

interpreted as progress rather than failure. Both DS and ESL students are involved in a process of assimilation in which they continually are testing hypotheses. So logically, "when [these] learners move into uncertain territory, they tend to go by the 'rules,' even where the rules lead them to produce forms that sound completely wrong" (Shaughnessy 99). Therefore, as Shaughnessy claims, "students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners learn by making mistakes" (5). Essentially, these students are working collaboratively with instructors in ways characteristic of beginners.

Ideally, these similarities between DS learners and ESL learners seem commensurable, that is, capable of being combined into the same classroom. Yet, one fundamental assumption is lacking—all faculty and administrators must assume that these students are beginners. And unfortunately, history negates this belief. The earliest term adopted for students not prepared for Freshman Composition was "remedial." Still used today, the remedial model isolates the student and skills from real college contexts in an effort to provide a sterile "fix-it station" for these underachievers. The "remedial" courses are often interpreted as punishment for not having done better in high school or on the SAT or on the writing assessment test. This differs significantly from the instructor's mentality toward ESL students. As one of my colleagues explained to me, "these international students need to be given special privileges to help them become emotionally integrated into the college."

ESL students are recognized as beginners—they do not think in English and thus, they do not know how to fix written English. For instance, if an ESL student neglects to

include an –s on a plural noun, the instructor may automatically assume that the student lacks the concept of plurality in his/her native language. Conversely, if a DS student neglects to include an –s on a plural noun, the instructor may assume carelessness and/or stupidity on the part of the student because this student has been technically functioning in English for years. The student knows the English orthography and the principle of capitalization and to read left to right horizontally and to place spaces between the words (unlike the ESL student). The DS student is not recognized as a beginner. Yet as is often neglected "the fact that he produces sentences in speaking does not mean that he [sic] understands periods in writing" (Shaughnessy 24).

This preferential treatment seems to set very different standards for these two groups of students. ESL students need to reach a level of intelligibility (cognizant of grammatical restraints) while DS students are required to achieve a level of acceptability (cognizant of social restraints). Consequently, it is almost impossible to evaluate DS and ESL students along the same continuum in one combined classroom. Likewise, these assumptions influence the pedagogies that instructors adopt within their classrooms. Integrating a "beginner" pedagogy and an "underachiever" seems impossible. No administrator would require that an instructor teach both advanced calculus and beginning math at the same time and in the same classroom.

In an attempt toward integration, many schools have swapped the label "remedial writing" for "basic writing." In short, this change attempts to see the student as not lacking intelligence or effort. Instead, the student is exceeding the limits of his/her ability as a writer in an effort to articulate a mature or subtle thought. The student lacks the necessary skills because perhaps the school system has passed over him/her without

really identifying the reasons for lack of success. Furthermore, Shaughnessy believes that "by the time he [sic] reaches college, the BW student both resents and resists his venerability as a writer. He is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes" (7), whereas the ESL student can usually write in his/her own native language. Thus, the ESL student has experienced a certain amount of success with language. Any lack of success with English is simply attributed to first language interference, such as the allophone in the native language is a phoneme in the target language and the phonemes may have different distributions in the two languages.

Another more recent category used to refer to this particular group of native speakers is "Developmental Studies"—defined as students who are at a lower developmental level than other students. The pedagogy for these students is "catch up" and remedy the deficiencies missed by earlier school systems. For example, at my previous institution, our policy read, "Those students who do not successfully complete the Writing Assessment Test will be counseled by the Developmental Skills Instructors to plan a course of study, including a tutor, if necessary to remedy any writing deficiencies."

In conclusion, many variables in written language learning cannot be controlled: the size of the class, age, motivation, training, and personality of the students. However, there are variables that we can control. While we may have little control over the administration's decision to hire unqualified part-timers, we can intervene and point out the disadvantages of homogenizing classrooms—that is, combining DS students with ESL students. We must help administrators to recognize not only the pragmatic benefits, but the biases inherent in a homogenized classroom for "remedial" students that radiates remnants of the Critical Age Hypothesis to all those prospective faculty that want to

make a difference—faculty that want to believe that they can be writing teachers even to those who have yet to acquire writing.

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